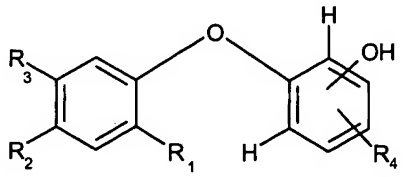
22. (previously presented): An antimicrobial method, which comprises contacting a substrate with an antimicrobially effective amount of a hydroxydiphenyl ether compound of the formula

(1) 

wherein, when OH is in the para position with respect to the ether linkage

R_1 is C_1-C_{20}alkyl, C_5-C_7cycloalkyl, C_1-C_6alkylcarbonyl, C_1-C_{20}alkoxy, phenyl or phenyl-C_1-C_3-alkyl;

R_2 is hydrogen;

R_3 is C_1-C_{20}alkyl or C_1-C_{20}alkoxy;

R_4 is hydrogen; and wherein,

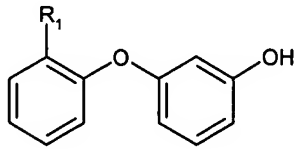
when OH is in the meta position with respect to the ether linkage

R_2 is hydrogen, C_1-C_{20}alkyl, hydroxy substituted C_1-C_{20}alkyl or C_1-C_6alkylcarbonyl;

R_1 and R_3 are independently of each other hydrogen or C_1-C_{20}alkyl;

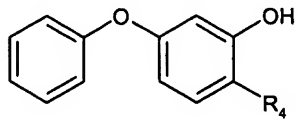
R_4 is hydrogen, hydroxy substituted C_1-C_{20}alkyl or C_5-C_7cycloalkyl.

23. (previously presented): An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a compound of formula

(6) 

wherein R_1 is C_1-C_5alkyl is employed.

24. (previously presented): An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a compound of formula

(7) 

wherein R_4 is C_1-C_5alkyl is employed.

25 (previously presented): An antimicrobial method according to claim 22 which is carried out during finishing of undyed and dyed or printed fibre materials.

26. (previously presented): A method according to claim 22 for the antimicrobial treatment of skin, mucous membranes or hair which comprises applying an antimicrobially effective amount of a compound of the formula (1) as defined in claim 22 thereto.

27. (previously presented): A method of use of a compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 which comprises the incorporation of an antimicrobially effective amount of said compound into polymeric materials or the antimicrobial finishing of said polymeric materials with an antimicrobially effective amount of said compound as defined in claim 22.

28. (previously presented): A method according to claim 22 for the antimicrobial treatment of a hard surface which comprises applying to the hard surface an antimicrobially effective amount of a compound of the formula (1) as defined in claim 22.

29. (previously presented): A method for the antimicrobial treatment of teeth and gums which comprises applying an antimicrobially effective amount of a compound of the formula (1) as defined in claim 22 thereto.

30. (currently amended): ~~A~~ An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a personal care composition comprising at least one compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 and a cosmetically tolerable carrier or auxiliary is employed.

31. (currently amended): An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein an oral care composition comprising at least one compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 and a carrier or auxiliary is employed.

32. (currently amended): ~~A~~ An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a detergent composition comprising at least one compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 and a carrier or auxiliary is employed.

33. (currently amended): ~~A~~ An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 wherein OH is in the meta position with respect to the ether linkage and R_2, R_3 and R_4 are hydrogen and R_1 is C_1-C_{20} alkyl, or wherein OH is in the para position with respect to the ether linkage and R_2 and R_4 are hydrogen and R_1 and R_3 are C_1-C_{20}alkyl is employed.

34. (cancelled).

35. (currently amended): ~~A~~ An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 wherein OH is in the meta position with respect to the ether linkage and R_1, R_2 and R_3 are hydrogen and R_4 is in the para position with respect to the ether linkage and is C_1-C_6alkylcarbonyl is employed.

36. (cancelled).

37. (currently amended): ~~A~~ An antimicrobial method according to claim 22, wherein a compound of formula (1) as defined in claim 22 wherein OH is in the meta position with respect to the ether linkage and R_1, R_2 and R_3 are hydrogen and R_4 is in the para position with respect to the ether linkage and is C_1-C_{20}alkyl.

38. (cancelled).